



CITY OF HOUSTON

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The Honorable Dr. Greg Bonnen
Chairman, House Committee on Appropriations
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711-2068

Dear Chairman Bonnen,

Thank you to the members of the Appropriations Committee for having this hearing regarding “Uvalde Response: Mental Health and School Safety.”

Mental Health America (MHA) has published their 2022 “State of Mental Health in America” with rankings of mental health statistics from several states. In the “Access to Care” ranking, MHA measures access to insurance, access to treatment, quality and cost of insurance, access to special education, and workforce availability.

Texas places last in the nation in this measurement.

Despite noted efforts by the state to invest in behavioral health programs over the last several sessions, the fact remains that Texans are not able to access care.

Often after mass shootings, one reaction is to discuss “mental health” and the increased investments needed to combat this tragedy. However, this is both regrettable and stigmatizing. People suffering from a mental illness are 8 to 9 times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime than commit one.

This is not meant to question the motivations of those making this connection. The ability to access firearms would seem more directly related to gun violence. However, the lack of access to mental healthcare should move all policy makers to act on what is a crisis situation in Texas.

Efforts to increase the opportunities and coverage for school based behavioral health programs should be applauded. But as the measurements indicate, Texas is far behind in making those access points a reality. The resources associated with supportive staff and services is imperative, and funding increases should be on the order of magnitudes greater.

The following represents how the intention of funding programs is running into fiscal limitation. It comes from a June 22nd report from Texans Care for Children:

Recognizing the importance of reaching students before they are in a mental health crisis, the Legislature also passed comprehensive student mental health legislation in 2019. But school districts are not able to implement and sustain comprehensive mental health strategies because the state does not provide a reliable or sufficient source of funding for them. Instead, districts receive school safety funding from the state that is unpredictable, limited to approximately \$10 per student, and intended to cover everything from building security to school counselors.

The brief goes on to describe specific funding recommendations, such as to the Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHATT), services from the YES Waiver program, and funding for Local Mental Health Authorities. Resources for these programs, especially in view of the pandemic related increases in behavioral health needs, is vital for the present and future of our state.

As a local government, we often see the consequences of a failure to invest in access for mental healthcare. Unfortunately, care often comes late and in a criminal justice setting. It is frequently stated that the Harris County Jail is the largest mental health facility in the State of Texas. However, it should be noted that more people received inpatient care at this single jail facility than the entire inpatient capacity of the state hospital system.

At the Houston Police Department, we have an entire division that is trained and deployed for service calls related to behavioral health crisis interventions. The Mental Health Division helps to offer both the public safety and needed medical assistance for those experiencing a mental health crisis. The City of Houston has invested almost \$23 million in American Rescue Plan Act funding to increase the access of proven programs for mental health system.

Again, the failure to address behavioral health needs leads to increased demand on local public safety systems. Texans deserve better.

Making investments for behavioral health interventions for young Texans in school-based settings should be a consensus issue for members of the Texas Legislature. There is no reason why this should not be a top funding priority.

For the last month, Houston City Council has roped off 19 chairs in Council Chambers representing each of the student victims at Uvalde, along with 2 chairs for the teachers killed. Each seat contained a large picture of the student with their name and age. Those pictures were hand delivered with other items to the families along with a personal letter from Mayor Turner.

Texas must honor the lives of those lost with actions, not just words. Funding these programs and increasing access to mental health services is part of that promise.

Sincerely,



Sylvester Turner
Mayor



Haley Carter
Chair, Commission Against Gun Violence